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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0706
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SUBJECT: BJP, SHIV SENA FACE TROUBLES HEADING INTO MUMBAI ELECTIONS

REF: A: MUMBAI 38; B: MUMBAI 31

Summary

1. (SBU) Since 1992 a "saffron alliance" of Shiv Sena and the BJP has controlled the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC), Mumbai's main municipal body. By all accounts, both parties will struggle to maintain power in the BMC in the elections scheduled for February 1 (ref A). The Shiv Sena was devastated by the defection of party leaders Narayan Rane and Raj Thackeray in 2005. Shiv Sena and BJP both have considerable organizational strengths, however, and Sena has attempted to regroup under the leadership of Uddhav Thackeray, the son of party boss Balsaheb Thackeray. Bal's nephew Raj has formed his own political party and is playing a spoiler role, looking to position himself for future elections. End summary.

Shiv Sena's Three-Way Split

2. (SBU) Shiv Sena, the dominant partner in the "saffron alliance" is facing what many are describing as its day of judgment on February 1, the date of the BMC elections (ref A). Longtime boss Bal Thackeray is fading from power due to age and illness, and many observers describe the defections of Rane and Raj as having split the party into three factions. Rane and his followers joined the rival Congress party and helped Congress make big gains in state by-elections. If Congress achieves similar results in the BMC elections, observers say Rane will have emerged as a potential rival to Maharashtra Chief Minister Vilasrao Deshmukh.

Raj Thackeray's Role

3. (SBU) The defection of Raj Thackeray, Bal Thackeray's charismatic nephew, in late 2005 gave a further blow to the party. Raj Thackeray has formed his own party, the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS). Analysts describe the MNS as a party without any particular ideology that is primarily a vehicle for Raj's political ambitions. The party is still young, has no broad base or electoral machinery, and Raj had not been able to attract as large a cadre of talented party workers with leadership qualities as he had hoped. Nonetheless, observers in

Mumbai say Raj has little to lose, and suggest that he is positioning himself for an influential role in future elections.

His primary strength is his ability to present himself as a fresh alternative to the BJP/Sena and Congress/NCP coalitions that have traditionally vied for power in Maharashtra.

14. (SBU) Raj has made efforts to delineate himself from the Hindutva and Maharashtra-first themes that were championed by the BJP-Sena. He paints himself as a more inclusive leader and has reached out to Muslims, Dalits, and the growing population of migrants from other Indian states. His campaign message has been "Give me a chance," and analysts say that despite his previous high-level involvement with Shiv Sena, voters do see him as a separate entity and a fresh voice. Nonetheless, the MNS is viewed as a one-man army that is unlikely to win many seats. Anything more than a handful of seats, however, should establish the MNS on Mumbai's political scene and position Thackeray well for future state and national elections, which is his probable long-term strategy. Mumbai's coalition arithmetic poses a serious challenge to the MNS, however. No serious commentator believes that the party can ever gain power without a serious partner. The most obvious alliance partner, BJP, is unlikely to sever ties with Shiv Sena until Bal Thackeray dies, which may be some time off.

BJP's Woes

15. (SBU) The BJP is also facing major problems in the BMC elections. In 2006, the Mumbai branch of the party suffered two major setbacks with the murder of party hopeful Pramod Mahajan and a car accident that sent party strategist Gopinath Munde to the hospital for several weeks. Observers say the absence of these two men has left the BJP without direction. As outlined in ref B, BJP leaders are planning to use Gujarat Chief Minister

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Narendra Modi as their star campaigner in the BMC elections, but it is unclear what impact Modi will have.

A New Generation

16. (SBU) Uddhav Thackeray has been widely criticized for his leadership of Shiv Sena, particularly in comparison with his more charismatic cousin Raj. Rajiv Khandekar, an editor with the Marathi-language newspaper "Lok Satta" told us that Uddhav used the past year to consolidate control of the party by placing loyalists in key positions. Uddhav has also replaced many incumbents in the upcoming elections with new candidates. Khandekar says this may be costly in the short-term, but it will ensure the party's survival under Uddhav's leadership and it should reinvigorate its image. To combat the negative publicity of the earlier defections, Bal Thackeray has returned to a more active campaign role.

17. (SBU) Mumbai voters are increasingly frustrated with the lack of progress with basic services and high levels of corruption in the BMC. After 15 years in power, BJP-Sena are likely to be held responsible for the BMC's failings. Khandekar told poloff that the parties have responded by returning to Hindutva themes and that several incidents last year provided a big lift to BJP-Sena's fortunes. He pointed to the large gathering of Muslim youths in South Mumbai in March, the riots that occurred in July and November, and the railway bombings on July 11 as events that frightened Mumbai voters and drew many back to BJP-Sena. BJP member Ashish Shelar confirmed the importance of security to Mumbai voters, saying his party intended to ask "Who has shown they will protect Hindus in Mumbai?"

18. (SBU) Other observers suggest that BJP and Shiv Sena's return to Hindutva themes stem from difficulties finding messages with a broader appeal. The parties made attempts to reach out to a wider audience in recent years, but they have largely abandoned these efforts in the current election. Khandekar said that although Marathi speakers are declining as a percentage of

Mumbai's population, their high voter-turnout rate makes them a still-important constituency. With this in mind, the Sena leadership has returned to strategies such as questioning whether Muslims deserve minority status in India, demanding residency permits for Mumbai, and urging people to speak only Marathi. Congress and NCP have countered by running many Marathi-speaking candidates of their own and appear to be hoping to neutralize the issue. Most interlocutors we spoke with had been predicting a Congress/NCP victory, but since these parties were unable to cooperate prior to the election, many now think that BJP-Sena's organizational strength may tip the election in their favor.

19. (SBU) Anant Gadgil of Congress expressed fear to poloff that BJP-Sena will instigate acts of communal violence prior to the election in order to sway voters in their direction. Most analysts were doubtful about the likelihood of such acts occurring, but the riots of in July and September 2006 demonstrate that even minor offences can spark violence in the region. There have been reports of some Sena violence directed against MNS campaign workers, but so far no major incidents have occurred.

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